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SUBJECT: ZAPATERO AND SPANISH TROOPS IN IRAQ: POLITICAL
PRESSURES FOR WITHDRAWAL

Classified By: Charge J. Robert Manzanares per 1.5 (b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Political pressure is high on incoming Socialist President Rodriguez Zapatero to fulfill his campaign promise to pull the 1300 Spanish troops out of Iraq absent a new UN mandate giving the UN the lead role. Zapatero is on the hook to demonstrate to his supporters that his surprise election March 14 ushered in a significant change from the Aznar years. Zapatero, who vehemently opposed the Iraq war, has repeatedly emphasized, publicly and privately, that he will comply with his campaign promises. The clearest way to manifest this would be to pull the troops out. Nonetheless, the Socialists are sensitive to charges a Spanish withdrawal following the March 11 Madrid terror attacks would appear to be cutting and running in the face of terror. A new UNSCR giving the UN a lead role might provide Zapatero with cover to keep the troops in, but what exactly Zapatero can accept remains vague since he has not defined it. We expect him to take his cues from France and Germany. Public opinion in the wake of March 11 regards Spain as being in the line of Jihadist fire because of the Aznar government's Iraq policy and favors withdrawal. Recent fighting in Najaf between Spanish forces and Shiite extremists has heightened concerns about the Iraq deployment. Significant Spanish losses there could clinch the decision to pull out. End Summary.

The Case for Withdrawal

12. (C) Zapatero has been vehemently against the Iraq war from the beginning. He has consistently maintained that the war was founded on lies, and is immoral and illegal. Many of the 11 million Spaniards who voted for the Socialists on March 14 share his view. Many Socialists, especially those on the left, want the troops out now regardless of a UN resolution. As far as Spanish opinion as a whole, according to a radio (Cadena Ser) poll last week, 38% of respondents favored Spanish troops staying in Iraq if there were a new UN mandate while 42% favor pulling the troops out even if the UN takes control of Iraq. Only a small percentage favor the troops staying under the current mandate. Many Socialists are uncomfortable with the assertive international role for Spain that Aznar espoused and, since the March 11 attacks, believe Aznar's alliance with the US put Spain in the direct line of fire for Islamist terrorists.

Caving in to Terrorists?

13. (C) The Socialists are, however, sensitive to the charge that withdrawal from Iraq means caving in to terrorist blackmail following March 11. They note that Zapatero's pledge to withdraw long predated March 11 (though the Socialists would not have been elected had the March 11 attacks not taken place). Jose Blanco, Socialist Party National Coordinator, noted on April 6: "Let's not mix apples and oranges. One thing is terrorism which has to be fought on all fronts. Another thing is our politics concerning the war in Iraq. Politically we shouldn't link one thing with the other." Popular sentiment, however, does link them. Many believe Spain is now exposed to jihadist terrorism as a result of a military deployment in Iraq that most Spaniards oppose.

14. (C) Antiterrorism marchers numbering 25,000 turned out April 5 in Leganes, the site of the April 3 shootout and suicide of the suspected leaders of the March 11 Madrid terror attacks. The march underlined that many Spaniards do link the March 11 terror attacks to Spain's presence in Iraq. The communique for the march, at the urging of the Socialist mayor of Leganes, included an explicit call for Spain to withdraw its troops from Iraq. (This prompted Aznar's Popular Party to boycott the march and organize its own on April 6). The message that came out of the April 5 rally was that since Spaniards never wanted to be in Iraq in the first place, Spain should withdraw, lower its profile, and thereby remove itself as a target. Images of the Shiite riots in Najaf and elsewhere further agitated Spanish opinion against Spain's presence in Iraq, as did reports that Spanish troops returned fire on rioters in Najaf April 4, killing about 20.

UN Resolution Giving UN a Lead Role

15. (C) FM designate Moratinos has been in the lead in

holding up the possibility that a new UNSCR giving the UN the leading role in the Iraq could satisfy Zapatero's electoral pledge. However, Zapatero and his key political advisors such as Jose Blanco and Jesus Caldera, have been less forward leaning than Moratinos. The posture of France and Germany on a new resolution should be important, since Zapatero has made it clear that he wants to follow their lead. If France and Germany are on board, Zapatero will feel pressure to follow suit. One prominent commentator, well connected in the PSOE, noted to us that if, for example, France were willing to commit troops to Iraq under a new UNSCR, Zapatero would be able to show that the situation had fundamentally changed and keep Spanish troops there.

Comment

16. (C) Indications are that Zapatero has not made a final decision on what to do about the troops. The "pull the troops out" sentiment from his base, and which his key political advisors share, will be a critical factor weighing on him. For Zapatero, the easiest scenario would be no new UN resolution, which would mean he would have no choice but to pull the troops out. A UN resolution expanding the UN role will force him to make a choice. In this case, Zapatero's allies in the all important Prisa media group might be able to help him sell the line that he had won by successfully pushing for an increased UN role and give him cover to keep the troops in. Zapatero may also be susceptible to the argument that, whatever the rationale or lack thereof for the war, undercutting the coalition now could prove disastrous. Nonetheless, escalation of fighting in Southern Iraq, particularly if Spanish forces suffer significant losses, may clinch the decision in favor of withdrawal.

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